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ABSTRACT

The elementary school English-as-a-Second-Language classroom can be seen as a microcosm of a pluralistic society. Different kinds of control mechanisms influence both teachers and pupils and can lead to divided loyalties. These mechanisms include classroom organization, the number of pupils, and the attitudes of pupils toward one another. It is vital to encourage development of the school's pluralism and allow competencies to emerge fully. Interaction comes to full expression in group work, and teacher-controlled grouping may be the most effective arrangement. Children should be invited to exchange ideas and express opinions about why groups are formed as they are, and why pupils' personalities are manifested differently. For pupils to realize that no one knows best is an important step in eliciting each individual's contribution. Traditionally, teachers have been trained to rely on knowledge based on science, which is only one kind of knowledge. Different traditions of knowledge should at least be respected on equal terms. Good teachers possess collective knowledge and skills, usually known as intuition, that are as important as methodology in the classroom. (MSE)

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Method, Philosophy, or What?

Some reflections on teaching EFL at Primary School.

by

Wiveca Sotro

It is 8.20 a.m. Twenty-five pairs of eyes are directed at me. Twenty-five individuals, each with his or her personal ambitions, expectations and requirements, seem ready for their English class. My preparation is there on the table in front of me. I want to offer my pupils so much. I spent so much time working out interesting tasks. Yet, a vague feeling of uncertainty is hovering in the air ... Who will care or appreciate? Whose face will gradually go blank as eyes run along incomprehensible signs of a printed page? Whose mind is still on last night's row at home? Did I consider all these aspects when preparing today's work for my English class?

My years of teaching English to young beginners (children start learning English at the age of ten in Sweden) have made me reflect not only upon the actual teaching and learning of the new language, but also on the classroom as a microcosm of a pluralistic society.

A number of questions keep cropping up when organizing classroom activities: What do we teachers want the pupils to learn? Why do we want them to learn what we teach? How do we want them to develop their knowledge? How can we relate to the capacities and possibilities of the individual pupil? How much space do we offer the individual pupil, and to what extent do we make it possible for him to assume responsibility for his own learning? How does school as an institution influence the possibilities to achieve optimal answers to the above questions?

Different kinds of control mechanisms influence both teachers and pupils and can lead to divided loyalties. Take classroom size and lay out. Classrooms in Swedish schools are usually designed for placement of desks in rows, and other configurations, such as desks in groups of four, or desks placed as an open square, are generally unfeasible. Such circumstances tally ill with ambitions towards greater autonomy and responsibility among our learners and many teachers tend to maintain the traditional teacher-up-front methods.

The number of pupils and their attitudes towards one another are naturally also important factors of control, both inside and outside the classroom. These attitudes were founded in pre-school years and the "hidden curriculum", discussed by Donald Broady,¹

¹ Den dolda läroplanen, Symposium, 1982. Broady's discussion is based on *Life in Classrooms* by Philip W Jackson, 1968.

concerns not only the relations between teacher and pupil, but also the relations among the pupils themselves. The Swedish national curriculum states that "school must shape pupils to become good members of our democratic society". This must of course be our aim. But we all know how our think-and-live-freely-democracy functions and how vigilant we must be in order not to allow ourselves to be manipulated by various "experts". We also become aware that many clauses in the national curriculum stand forth solely as utopian wishes. Key-ideals such as tolerance, equal rights, personal integrity, solidarity with people of other nationalities, should be placed at the forefront in our society to a much larger extent than is the case at this very moment. But, as Georg Henrik von Wright says, it is a fact that "most of what is possible to achieve corresponds to *somebody's* interest".²

School has a population as pluralistic as the society of which it is part. Consequently, it becomes vital to encourage the development of its many-faceted character and to allow the various competences to come to full expression. One of the most difficult, but also one of the most important, tasks of the teacher is to provide for the needs of each individual pupil. Again we are confronted with the question of somebody's interest or, perhaps rather, somebody's knowledge, and inevitably we have to deal with issues of power and power relations. In the classroom, whose knowledge can I offer my pupils? My own, of course. And my interpretation of gathered experiences. While my goal is not to force my "truth" upon the pupils, it cannot be avoided that my discourse³ is the one they must consider. My dilemma as a teacher is obvious; I believe in my message; in my knowledge; and it flatters my vanity when I recognize traces of my argument in theirs. But at the same time I want to leave enough space for them to decide whether my message is acceptable or not. I would like to see them make their own choices and their own decisions. In short, to become just the critically-minded individuals and conscious citizens visualised in the national curriculum.

School is a hierarchically conceived institution; one which legitimizes (by being compulsory and repressive) a power structure which the teacher accepts. The pupil is subjected to this power structure and, in his turn, also accepts it - though in many cases most unwillingly. This is where the danger lies: that the confrontation becomes not the positive, existentially enriching one, suggested by Karl Jaspers,⁴ but a confrontation of destructive conflict, with winners and losers. To counter such tendencies within school, as they appear today, is no easy matter. We are faced with an antinomy: preservation of the authoritarian hierarchy versus the individual freedom, intrinsic to our democratic ideals. Attempts at achieving compromises often lead to either ambivalent attitudes to situations of conflict, or to vague wording in curriculums.

² Vetenskapen och förnuftet, Borgå, 1987 (1986). pp 138ff

³ The term is here used in the sense given by philosophers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and others.

⁴ Philosophie, Vol II, Berlin, 1956 (1932). p 65

Interaction comes to full expression when forming groups for work in the classroom. Reactions among the children naturally differ, depending on whether they are allowed to pick their own partners or not. Uncontrolled grouping, favouring the "natural" - in all senses of the term - constellations, based on friendship or common interests invariably generates streaming. It excludes the 'eternal outsiders'. On rare occasions, often prompted by the teacher, the advanced pupil invites a weaker one to work with him/her, while the opposite case is the rule. Teacher-controlled grouping may result in more efficient work on the whole, certainly in a fair amount of piloting for the weaker pupils, and most certainly in giving each child the opportunity to participate in the sharing process of the group.

One of our "educational concerns"¹ must be to invite an exchange of ideas in the class and bring the children to express their opinions as to why groups are formed in a certain way and why pupils manifest their personalities differently. And also to consider how we develop respect for and empathy with one another.² It is a fact that people are good at doing different things and arguing for uniformity is neither fruitful nor desirable. Convincing a child (or an adult, for that matter) that being able to mend a puncture is as laudable as working out a sum is not all that obvious, in a world which favours academic knowledge.

To create an attitude to the exchange of knowledge, be it of the head or of the hand, is clearly one step on the road towards respect for the individual and his possibilities to hold his own in interaction with the rest of the group. No one has a monopoly of "truth". It is of utmost importance for the teacher to set a good example, i.e. show interest in, and respect for, pupils who do not fit into our academic models of knowledge. It is equally important to preserve different expressions of knowledge and experiences contributed by the individual pupils; contributions which are enriching for each person in the classroom. A quotation from one of Dick Allwright's many valuable articles on interaction in the classroom may illustrate my point: "We are no longer talking of teachers teaching and learners learning, but of everyone contributing to the management of everyone's learning (including their own, and including the teacher's, of course)."³

To realize that no one knows best, (even when discussing teaching methodology) is another important point proffered by Dick Allwright who wants "a moratorium on

¹ See James Boyd White, *Heracle's Bow. Essays on the Rhetoric and Poetics of the Law*. Madison, Wisconsin, 1985. p 31

² Cf the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, who, like Derrida, discards the totalitarianism of system-builders and all philosophy of identity. Instead of attempting to make everything alike, he strives for *la différence*, which is non-hierarchic and positive, unless used for political, moral or psychological repression.

³ "The Importance of Interaction in Classroom Language Learning", *Applied Linguistics*, Vol 5, No 2, 1984. p 158

methodological comparisons" and instead suggests "a study of teaching *style*".¹ Included in "style" is teacher self-examination, one's attitude to knowledge and skills, one's way of treating the language classroom "as a whole culture",² with a variety of individuals to whom must be given optimal chances of success.

It is indeed of importance to clarify to oneself as a teacher (and, by one's acts and one's ways of being in the classroom, to the pupils,) one's attitudes to knowledge and to the traditions influencing our attitudes to the concept in question. I do not intend to enter into a profound epistemological analysis, but merely to point towards a couple of issues of importance to me as teacher and teacher trainer.³

Paul Feyerabend points out in *Science in a Free Society*⁴ that in a free society the tradition of knowledge based on science is only one of many traditions, and that all traditions "*have equal rights and equal access to the centres of power*".⁵ Moreover, we are mistaken when we base our view of knowledge solely on the sciences and trust the makers of theories, the specialists or intellectuals, to be in possession of all the answers.

What tradition do we teachers then represent? And how do we consider a view of knowledge which does not correspond to ours? Swedish university regulations state that university education should be scientifically based, and the national curriculum for our schools underlines that the teaching of school subjects should reflect the scientific disciplines concerned. Hereby is implied a rejection of non-scientific traditions of knowledge; a rejection of knowledge not founded theoretically, but based on experience, intuition, judgment; a rejection of knowledge which does not allow quantitative assessment in concrete terms.⁶

It is obvious that I represent the academic tradition (or abstract tradition, to use Feyerabend's term) and that I have a certain reluctance or even incapacity to identify with other traditions of knowledge which, besides, occupy a qualitatively lower rank in socio-cultural respects. It is interesting, not to say unfortunate, that we in the Western world always speak about diametrically opposed entities, about one quality in opposition to another, but seldom about a relationship where one quality functions complementarily with another. Feyerabend's viewpoint seems to approach a perspective which *respects on*

¹ *Observation in the Language Classroom*, London, 1988, p 55. The quotation is from a paper delivered in 1972, reprinted in *Observation* and still highly valid.

² *ibid* p 257. Here, Allwright refers to the analysis of different metaphors for a classroom by M.P. Breen in "The Social Context for Language Learning - A Neglected Situation?" *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 7:2, 1985, pp 136-158

³ In the following I shall refer to the group of teachers to which I belong, teachers of theoretical subjects.

⁴ The book was published in 1978 as a sequel to *Against Method*. A version was published in German in 1979, *Erkenntnis für freie Menschen*, but can hardly be considered merely a translation of the former.

⁵ *Science in a Free Society*, p 9

⁶ A most interesting contribution to the discussion of traditions of knowledge is Mike Cooley's *Architect or Bee? The Human Price of Technology*. London, rev ed 1987

equal terms different traditions of knowledge. This is perhaps the closest we can get to the ideal solution. In a different context, dealing with intercultural phenomena, I suggested a model which creates new solutions by amalgamation of different components.¹

When we teachers complain that our pupils do not "know" anything, we usually refer to *theoretical* knowledge, the one we represent and appreciate - the knowledge of the head. All which has to do with the hand does not count in the same way ... It is very difficult to liberate oneself from the prejudices of the tradition with which one has been brought up. (This goes for all traditions.) To "know" something has different connotations, all depending on which tradition one acknowledges.

As for teacher knowledge, it seems to have something of the Aristotelian *phronesis* - prudence or practical wisdom - where judgment and even an ethical dimension stand forth in the visible expression of knowledge - the act. As teachers we constantly end up in situations where we cannot simply apply a system of rules, but where we must rely on the "implicit" or "silent" knowledge, acquired during years of active teaching. This kind of knowledge is usually strictly personal;² it cannot be formalised, or included in a normative system, or even verbalised. What is conceived as intuition is in reality a never-ending dialogue between stored experience and constantly new situations; a never-achieved modification of collected knowledge. In school, it is in the encounter with a variation of classes, individuals and conditions that the implicit, personal knowledge proves extremely valuable. A good teacher has knowledge and skill, the latter word having "its roots in old Norse '*skil*', meaning 'distinction',"³ signifying the capacity to make initiated judgments.

The opposition that can be perceived between the dominant abstract, scientific tradition and the historical, moral tradition⁴ seems to me possible to blend into an approach where we find the traditions as complementary parts in a functioning totality; where the combination of "academic" and "non-academic" can produce concepts of knowledge and attitudes to traditions of knowledge which are free from classification. So called "good and useful" research has hitherto mostly been "scientific research" which has meant that a whole range of areas has been excluded for being "non-scientific"; areas which seem to be of great importance for our attempts to understand what exactly we are doing.

¹ Wiveca Sotto, "Internationalisation and Intercultural Understanding", *Babel. Journal of the Australian Federation of MLTA*, Vol 22, No 3, 1987. pp 38-40

² Concept introduced by Michael Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*, London, 1958, and developed by e.g. Herbert Dreyfus, Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin.

³ Observation made by Gunnar Bergendal in "Value of Work and Expert Systems", stencilled material, Malmö, 1988. p 2

⁴ Terms from Feyerabend, *Erkenntnis für freie Menschen*, p 50 and H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York, 1975. p 280

Methodology in a strict sense is in my view not enough if we want to promote optimal learning conditions in our classrooms. When we ask ourselves questions as to why certain pupils succeed and others fail to learn what we teach, we shall have to look at a whole range of different factors which are related to the points I have tried to develop in this paper. Owing to the wide spectrum of individual requirements, aspirations and ambitions that we are faced with in the classrooms, our suggested material, working methods, etc, are perhaps more in accordance with our own world view and our own traditions of knowledge than with those of our pupils.

Even if we try to detach ourselves from the traditional teacher role, it cannot be denied, of course, that we still are the organizers of the classroom activities and that we still function as the authority in the eyes of the pupils. We occupy a position of power and wield great influence on our pupils. This alone should prompt us to continuous reflection on what we do in the classroom.

Thus, rather than looking upon learning and teaching from a methodological point of view only, I would like to suggest a more global picture encompassing several components which are difficult, not to say impossible, to describe with certitude or to integrate into a normative system. My interpretation of the communicative approach, or my "method", would be one of inspiring confidence in the pupils to interact dynamically and creatively, of teaching respect for each individual contribution - and refusal - and of indicating various roads to achievement. The process of each individual towards becoming conscious of his or her possibilities and limitations, and of becoming confident in his or her ambitions and aspirations, a process in which the teacher may have an advisory function, are the ultimate conditions of all learning.